accentism

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Abstract:

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This entry defines the word accentism, explains its implications in relation to the notion of the Other, and shows how accentism has been embedded in popular culture across the English speaking countries. It raises the question of accent discrimination as being correlated to false judgements of an individual's character, personality, or morals. Furthermore, it discusses how accent discrimination may hinder individual's opportunities in the everyday such as employment and workspace. Last, it questions accent reduction practices that may reinforce accent discrimination to favour social integration.

Mandarin:

这篇文章探讨了关于“accentism”这个词的词源，它引起的问题，它所属的文化特性，它在人们交流中所使用的策略，它可以如何被瓦解以及它所引起的一些思考。 这个词是由拉丁文词根‘accentus’（重音，语调）和拉丁文后缀 ‘isma’ 组成的。它表达了对于一些与标准口音不一致的口音所持的歧视态度。根据人们的口音，从而产生对此人的主观判断和刻板印象。这样的歧视将不仅发生于种族，还有社会阶级和性别。因为英语的世界语言地位，此文将把口音问题集中于英文上。在英国，‘received pronunciation’（标准英音）是地位的象征。其它口音很大程度上会被赋予消极的印象。在文学和影视作品中，外国口音常被用在反派角色身上。当媒体把非标准的口音幽默化，这将会把可笑荒诞和非标准口音联系起来。移民人群的口音也有被不受重视，不受信任的问题。对于口音歧视，人们希望通过消除非标准口音，从而融入主流社会，得到更好的就业机会。

Etymology:

Accent is generally defined as a way a person pronounces a language that represents her/his country or region. (OED-Oxford English Dictionary). The etymology of “accent” originates from the Latin “accentus” which means “stress, intonation” with its verb form “accino” (to sing).

While the notion of accent has been a feature in phonetics (e.g., word stress) and sociolinguistics to mark variations from a standard linguistic form, the word **accentism** is a neologism to refer to **accent discrimination** as coined by Baratta (2017).

Hence, the word **accentism** is a noun formed by the root “accent” and the suffix “-ism” which derives from the French ‘isme’ or from the Latin ‘isma’. The semantics of the “-ism” suffix mostly denotes an action or practice which is attached to a noun; here, it refers to discriminatory attitudes and practices similar to other ‘isms’ such as “sexism”, “ageism” and “ableism”.

Cultural specificity:

Although accentism can be observed in any **speech community**, in which a standardized language occupies a privileged position in relation to any accent deviation, the focus here will be on examples that involve the English language due to its globalized status as a *lingua franca.* Embedded in a imperial, colonizing history, the English language has been homogenized in educational contexts and media outlets, and with a ratio of non-native speakers of English outnumbering the native speakers (Crystal, 2003, p.69).



Teachers are helping students to use English as a lingua franca. Photo © Todor Petkov, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0 and adapted from the original.https://bit.ly/3AVr21r

The **homogenization** and **monolingual** tendencies to diffuse English across the world have paved the ground for accent discrimination. Accentism may occur in interactions between native speakers of standardized English (e.g., elite, mainstream, 'educated' language) and their interlocutors (e.g., individuals or groups from a different country, region, or social class). A non-standardized English is usually observed among migrants (e.g., immigrants, international students, foreign skilled-workers, refugees) who mostly speak with a foreign accent , or among native English speakers who come from different social groups or regions with local dialects.

Problematization:

Linguistic agreements on the definition of accent vary among many scholars. As Lippi-Green states, “accent is a loose reference to a specific way of speaking. There is no official or technical specification for what this might mean in linguistic terms” (2012, p. 43). Thus, an accent variation from a standard form becomes a fluid and ideological category which foments the emergence of accentism against an individual, an ethnic community, or a social group. Discriminatory acts judged from **prosodic features** (e.g., rhythm, pitch, intonation, cadence) which fall outside standardized forms are usually markers of geo-political power dynamics (countries and regions) and of differences in social status, literacies, and genders.

The problem of accentism at any category (ethnic, social class, gender) lies in the prejudices, biases, and reproduction of **stereotyped assessments** that reduce people's characters to how they speak, or better, sound. Discriminatory behaviours against accented English are accompanied by negative attitudes and emotions while unfounded judgments emerge during a social interaction.

What lies underneath the discrimination of an **accented English** is the framing of the individual as the Other, based on false assumptions or inappropriate correlations made to their character or personality, for example, implying that speakers with a certain accent in English may have low IQ, are infantile, naïve, untrustworthy. According to Dobrow and Gidney, the problem with accentism is that "We use our linguistic assessments of others to make such additional judgments as whether individuals are educated or unlettered, intelligent or stupid, rude or friendly (1998, p. 107).

Communication strategies:

Historically in the UK, English accent discrimination has occurred due to internal regional differences and social class conflicts. Moreover, an imperial past has developed a legitimate form named **Received Pronunciation** (RP) to standardize the various English accents across the island and internationally. According to Bourdieu, the imposition of a **legitimate**, **standard language** becomes a political strategy for securing power and hegemony. Thus, a standard language is seen as "impersonal and anonymous like the official uses it has to serve" (Bourdieu, 1991, p.48). Therefore, RP has been used as a governmental communicative strategy to homogenise local and foreign English accents and to spread it mostly by the official media outlet - BBC - and educational institutions such as the British Council.

Moreover, mainstream media in English speaking countries such as the US, Canada, and the UK have broadcast films, TV sitcoms, and cartoons that depict characters speaking with regional or foreign accents. A **critical**

consciousness viewer can help audience perceive media intention as twofold: 1- to denounce the prejudices elite groups hold towards people with non-standardized accents; 2- to reproduce/reinforce certain accent stereotypes to portray individuals with faulty characters that are either childish or Machiavellian.

In literature, foreign characters with uncanny accents have been portrayed as anti-hero. Such representation has also been expanded to the mass media such as TV and cinema. For example, the 19th-century Irish writer, Bram Stoker, mostly known by his gothic novel *Dracula* portrays a Count who is a vampire from Transylvania speaking English with *sui generis* accent:

“The old man motioned me in with his right hand with a courtly gesture, saying in excellent English, but with *a strange intonation [authors' italics]*: —'Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will!” (Dracula, 1986 [1897] p. 17).



[Bela Lugosi portrays the evil Count Dracula in the 1931 movie classic] [Photograph]. (2017). Chicago Tribune.

Subsequent Dracula film adaptations portray the Count speaking English with foreign accents (e.g., German, Slavic) to capture the evil side of the character. This representation foments accent discrimination against peoples from the Carpathian region or ethnicity.

In terms of children’s cartoons, such as *Despicabe Me* (2010) portrays a villain protagonist named Gru who sounds like having a Slavic accent. Thus, it reinforces a false correlation between people speaking English with a Slavic accent and having an unscrupulous personality. Moreover, the prevalence of having characters with "Slavic-accented English appears fairly frequently among villains", as Dobrow and Gidney (1998, p.115) point out.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yM9sKpQOuEw

Current choices for portraying villains with such type of accent might be attributed to historical geopolitical aspects and ideologies such as the Cold War.

To expose children to cartoons that equate a foreign accent to a villain character may create a **schema** (mental scripts) that correlates false associations of a certain accent with bad traits. This can eventually reinforce accentism.

Subversion:

Humor and **satire** can be used as subversive rhetorical devices to denounce bias, prejudice and stereotypes against accented English, as seen in some TV programs that represent characters as migrant workers. A famous British TV

sitcom from the 1970s called *Fawlty Towers* illustrates it. It uses humour and satire as rhetorical strategies across the dialogues between a Spanish hotel worker, named Manuel, and his English boss. Manuel is portrayed with poor linguistic skills which put him in trouble with his boss due to his thick accent and communication misunderstandings. In contrast, the hotel owner, Basil, is depicted as a snobbish and 'smart' Englishman, who constantly ridicules Manuel's accent. As a result, their interactions are disastrous and slapstick. However, Basil is usually the one who ends up paying a high price for his pedantic attitude.



[Basil and Manuel enjoying one of their many misunderstandings] [Photograph]. (2016). RTÉ. https://bit.ly/3D3OT0E

Basil associates Manuel's heavy accent with ignorance or stupidity, and therefore, he mistreats the immigrant worker. When complaining about Manuel's poor English and thick accent, Basil scoffs Manuel's learning capacity by mocking him and saying that "it'd be quicker to train a monkey" (Season 1 Episode 1 "A touch of class"). Moreover, the misunderstandings resulting from Manuel's poor language skills enrage Basil, making things worse as Manuel continues to behave naïvely. This can be observed in the following dialogue in which Basil is giving Manuel some restaurant instructions:

Basil: "There's too much butter on those trays. ON THOSE TRAYS!!"
Manuel, "No, no, not 'on those trays' sir. Uno, dos, tres".

Accentism can also occur when **mistrust** and **lack of credibility** is attributed to an immigrant. A recent Canadian sitcom titled "Kim's Convenience" (2016) portrays a Korean immigrant family running a convenience store in Toronto. Mr. Kim, the owner of the store, is represented with a thick accent.



Garry, C. (Writer), & Wellington, P. (Director). (2016, October 18). Ddong Chim (Season 1, Episode 3) [TV series episode]. In I. Fecan & A. Raffe (Executive Producers), Kim's Convenience. Thunderbird Films.

In Season 1 Episode 3 "Ddong Chim", Mr. Kim asks his daughter, Janet, who is a second-generation immigrant (i.e., Canadian accent speaker), to call the police to report that there is a parked car in a no-parking zone. His daughter, however, refuses to do it, and asks his father to call the police himself. He replies with his thick accent and broken English that **"Police hear accent, they don't take serious".** His response reveals that the police or any other government authority is very unlikely to give credibility to immigrants when they hear an accented English on the other side of the telephone line.

The conversation with his daughter may also suggest that Mr. Kim might have experienced some unfair treatment when he phoned the police to report a different situation in the past. This can be attributed to **linguist profiling**, that is, when non-standard language is assessed in order to prevent minorities from using services or support (Munro, 2003).

Discussion:

Accent discrimination occurs when a person is judged simply because they sound 'foreign', indicating that they come from another country, region, or represent a different social class. In other words, the individual is identified as part of an outgroup, distinct from the standard or mainstream group. As seen, accentism has been embedded in some TV programs, films, and cartoons to reinforce a foreign stereotyped identity or low social status. What makes it more complicated is that accentism creates negative and inferior images of the Other, functioning as a gatekeeper with implications of exclusions in the everyday; for example, preventing a person from being hired, performing a certain job, being promoted, or belonging to a certain social group just because of having a 'thick' accent.

Accentism has been highly ingrained in the English culture. The well-known Irish playwright, Bernard Shaw, in his play *Pygmalion* published in 1913, critically depicted accent discrimination in relation to English regionalism and social class differences. Later, his play was adapted into a movie *My Fair Lady.* It is a story about a young woman, named Eliza Doolittle with a cockney accent who sells flowers on the streets of London. She becomes a successful, respectable lady after receiving language lessons from a phonetics professor named Henry Higgins. The transformation of Eliza's social status stems from the change of her accent, from unintelligible "vulgar" cockney to high, "nobler" received pronunciation (RP) which secures her a space in society.



[Professor Higgins is teaching Eliza to learn proper pronunciation] [Photograph]. (2016). stuartjamesnz.wordpress.com. https://bit.ly/3k88PHh

The distinctions of the accents, which signify regionalism and social class differences, have been internalized by society not only in the 19th century but also nowadays. BBC English still employs the received pronunciation (RP), homogenizing the accented Englishes across the world, despite recent **accentism awareness** movements that have emerged such as https://accentism.org/

As some studies have pointed out, trainee English teachers in the UK feel pressured to reduce their regional accents and to adopt an RP accent, or a standardized accent, in order to sound more credible, professional, and respectable among their superiors and peers in the workplace as well as to find better job opportunities. According to Baratta (2021 p. 13), "this might be even more relevant in certain professions, such as teaching, in which the ideal may be to avoid broad accents at all costs. This is not about changing one's accent per se, but simply about reducing it."

Likewise, immigrants also strive for imitating a mainstream accent to fit in the workplace, school, and dominant communities; however, it seems inevitable that those people are judged by the way they speak as their social identity is shaped by their foreign accent.

Thus, to respond to immigrants' anxieties, **accent reduction** becomes a widespread service offered by speech coaches who can support accented speaking individuals with their phonological and psychological needs, as Baratta mentions that "accent modification often rests on the perceived need [...] to avoid negative stereotypes" (2016, p.

319). Similarly, many skilled workers and international students with thick accent yearn for sounding like a 'native speaker' in order to fit in and to feel socially accepted by the mainstream community with the hope of not being discriminated by the way they sound.

- Knowing that an accent is part of one's cultural identity and sense of Self, to what extent an individual should make an informed decision to reduce their accent?
- While an accented English can be perceived as intelligible for successful communication, would there be any ethical implications to accent reduction for gaining employability skills?
- How to build awareness of accent discrimination in the workspace or educational settings?

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